
THE THEATRE

by *GEORGE JEAN NATHAN*



TWO MUSICAL DRAMAS

THE Negro musical when written by Negroes is usually humorous; when written by whites, more often solemn. This is possibly a topic for a saucy essay, which I may write one day when and if I am in the mood. Since, however, I have already overdone the subject of the Negro in relation to the theatre, I do not feel inclined at the moment to pursue the matter and shall confine myself merely to a few speculative remarks.

Guarding against risky generalization, the white nevertheless seems determined to view his dark brother more seriously than the latter is disposed to view himself. This is a reverse condescension — more exactly, perhaps a snobbish generosity — of the kind one often observes in the treatment of minorities. In the case of some whites, it is sincere; in the case of more, it seems to be rather an

opportunism which, they hope, will rebound to their credit by establishing them as liberals with a deep sympathy and regard for their fellow-men of whatever color. The Negro is more forthright and more honest. If and when he writes of whites, he generally writes of them as gulls or bigoted knaves, which, all things considered, in the aggregate they most frequently are.

The white, in addition, likes to think of the Negro as a romantic. This, in turn, is the way one often looks upon a people apart from one's self, strange, remote, and markedly different. It is, in a word, the way the person not intimately acquainted with them looks upon, say, gypsies, Frenchmen, Latin violinists, and newspapermen. The average Negro, of course, is no more romantic than an Andalusian goat-herder or a church deacon, and considerably less so than even an old-line Southern white. That is, unless one regards as synonymous with

romance inherent unconcern and indifference, laziness, improvidence, and a penchant for humming bad tunes at inappropriate moments. He is, in brief, no more romantic than his average white brother. The latter simply sees him as romantic through his own romance-abbreviated vision.

What is worse, the white does not limit this aspect of the romantic to the Negro's lighter side but imbues it with importantly melancholy facets. The romance which he attaches to the Negro is part and parcel of what he is resolved to regard as the Negro's doomed and inevitable disappointment in the world, as if in this respect Negroes and men of other races were utterly dissimilar. The pseudo-adult white pleasures himself with the theory that the Negro is a child, either for purely sentimental reasons or because it lends unction to the collateral theory of his own relatively much greater wisdom and understanding.

In such a situation, Alan Paton's novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, stands out as exceptional for its poise and intelligence. If here and there it is sentimental, the sentiment is not arbitrarily incorporated into it but is honest and natural under the immediate circumstances. Simply and unaffectedly, the story of racial prejudice and hatred in British South Africa sings its say from the printed

page, and taking on size and not a little eloquence the tale of the Negro cleric and the white planter brought to some understanding and fellow sympathy by personal tragedies that have befallen them rings impressively true.

The musical tragedy which the Messrs. Anderson and Weill have now wrought from the novel and called *Lost in the Stars* has its merits but also its unmistakable defects. Anderson has been so little selective that the stage at times becomes crowded with elements that might well have been omitted. The final scene in which the Negro and white are seemingly made to solve the whole racial problem with a mere friendly handshake is, moreover, downright silly. The novel committed no such box-office hokum. The play or show suffers further from a puzzling monotony and, worse, from an over-all depressing air. The lift that was hoped for does not emerge; as the evening proceeds the feeling is diminuendo and the impression is of heavy weight rather than weighty affectibility. Strain has taken toll of the original simplicity, and a consciousness of gravity has supplanted an easy sense of it.

On the credit side is an avoidance, save at the end, of what might have been a temptation to theatricalize the novel's story out of its untheatricality and to embellish it, as is sometimes

done in such dramatizations, with elements supposedly galvanizing to the musical stage. Anderson has also tried his best to retain the novel's essential innocence, even if there are times when the staging confounds his intent and purpose. And, with the exception noted earlier, his resolve not in any way to cheapen his materials is clear.

On Weill's score it is not, save in certain particulars, easy for me to pontificate, since my knowledge of Zulu music is meagre and confined largely to a probably childish belief that it relies mainly on drums of various shapes, sizes and noises and on either something indistinguishable from the ecstasies of a football stadium or the droning sounds of a particularly assertive vacuum cleaner. I apologize for my Philistinism and ignorance. Beyond this dead ground, however, I may venture with slightly more confidence. Thus venturing, I may question Mr. Weill's honesty in once again borrowing from Drdla's *Souvenir* to provide another paraphrase of that composition and of his own derived *September Song* from *Knickerbocker Holiday* for his South African Negro; in leaning on Jerome Kern for a song for his ignorant Zulu maiden; in traces of scarcely Negroid Edmund Eysler for his other blacks; etc.

Perhaps, however, I do Mr. Weill

an injustice when I express such critical doubts. In an interview published in the *New York Times* before the show opened, he supported my skepticism: "But, you see, I wasn't trying to reproduce the native music of Africa any more than Maxwell Anderson was trying to provide with words a local-color picture of life there. I'm attempting to get to the heart of the public, and my public wouldn't feel anything if I gave them African tunes." Mr. Weill, in other words, has deliberately and dishonestly sold his score down the box-office river.

The exhibit is alternately helped and hurt by the Rouben Mamoulian staging and direction, which in its choruses, tableaux, etc., now and again appropriate and effective, nevertheless gradually acquire a forced and arty flavor. Mr. Mamoulian has stated his credo as follows: "It is possible to have realism but lose the truth. But you can use artifice in form and get truth without realism." Very true. But you can also so overuse artifice in form that truth becomes buried and lost in it. Mamoulian frequently mamoulianizes truth into artifice.

Of the actors, some of whom have been mamoulianized from Zulus into Oklahomans (with the exclamation point), Julian Mayfield as the Negro clergyman's son who pays with his life

for murder, is the only one, except for Gertrude Jeannette in the bit rôle of the protagonist's wife and Inez Matthews as the mother of the son's imminent illegitimate child, who manages to preserve some semblance of authenticity. Todd Duncan, in the chief rôle, has a valuable singing voice but is not gifted as a dramatic actor and, besides, has been directed into a smirking smugness and oily benignity that rid the character of any strength. Leslie Banks gives the white planter the routine British jowly performance, and the rest are hardly more noteworthy. A small colored boy named Herbert Coleman contributes a comical song called *Big Mole* that, on the opening night, seemed to be the audience's favorite feature of the occasion.

George Jenkins' settings, involving the shoving-out of more scenic cutouts representing houses, stores, shacks, jails, courtrooms and what not than figure in an elaborate revue, appeared greatly to impress everyone.

II

Marc Blitzstein's *Regina*, an attempt to fashion what approximates an opera but is called a musical drama out of Lillian Hellman's play, *The Little Foxes*, is unsuccessful for a number of reasons, most of them being Mr. Blitzstein's confusion of mere stuntiness with real artistic achieve-

ment. That he is experimentally adventurous is to be allowed, but his equipment for climbing mountains seems to be more aptly suited to the scaling of molehills. He has the courage and will for high endeavor, but at least thus far not the practical means. It is not that he hasn't a musical education; he obviously has. It is rather that, like a contumelious college boy, he affects the attitude of being hostile to his teachers and seeks to indicate his independence of them by making musical faces at them, behind their backs.

He is, in short, apparently so determined to assert his musical individuality that what emerges in this *Regina*, as it emerged in his earlier proletarian musicals, is less music than a kind of Scott Nearing hitting himself rhythmically on the head with a baton.

So far as the general critical objection to Blitzstein's conversion of the acrimonious and bitter Hellman drama into a musical goes, I can not agree. Other grim and bitter dramas have been set to music and to excellent effect. The apparent Broadway notion that opera is always necessarily full of sweetness and light is typical of the Broadway mind and Broadway taste. The limit which it has permitted cynicism is something like *Pal Joey*. There is no more good reason why Blitzstein should not have appropriated *The Little Foxes* for musical

purposes than why Richard Strauss should not have appropriated *Electra* or, for that matter, *Salome*. The objection should rather be confined to his means of procedure. That procedure, which involves among other things the occasional speaking of emotional dialogue and the singing of casual, is added proof of his resolve to be different merely for the sake of being different, and with the usual result that the resolve distills itself into the ridiculous.

Though Blitzstein prides himself on his instinct for the theatre, his work on this occasion indicates that the old maxim of the precedence of pride to fall often has some sense. He so confuses shrillness and noise with vibrant and deep emotion that an audience's reaction proceeds less from the heart than from the ear, as in the case of a loud automobile horn suddenly and frighteningly blown at one from the rear. He mistakes a musical shriek for a musical emotional stir. Some of his dramatic climaxes accordingly suggest nothing so much as musicalized women's college yells.

In the lighter moments of the exhibit, Blitzstein is more successful. In the dramatic, which are in the great majority, he fails for the simple reason that his approach to them is in terms of Sardou reduced to a 10-20-30 musical scale and elevated to an 80-90-100 racket.

There are those who disagree, though not the able music critic, Virgil Thomson, who, while allowing the work its moments of musical interest, observes that by and large, "the tonal habiliment of the script, as performed, is raucous in sound, coarse in texture, explosive, obstreperous, and strident. The musical composition is that of an incomplete opera, of one that hands over the expressive obligation to mere speech whenever the composer feels inadequate to handle the dramatic line." Leonard Bernstein, the able conductor, on the other hand is full of praise, though one has some little trouble understanding his enthusiasm for Blitzstein's performance on the peculiar ground that "Regina, perhaps one of the most ruthless characters in show business, sings melodies of enormous gentility and suaveness precisely at the moments when she is being most unscrupulous and heartless."

Only good words, however, may be written of the physical production, which is a constant delight to the eye even when the Blitzstein share in the proceedings disturbs the ear. Jane Pickens' Regina misses dramatically but is served fairly well vocally; Priscilla Gillette's daughter is much better all around; and two or three of the other rôles are given their due. The evening, in brief, calls only for a more skilful composer.

TITOISM: OUR MORAL PROBLEM

BY R. H. MARKHAM

WHAT the United States should do with as strange a political bedfellow as Marshal Tito is a question with a simple answer: it should use him as an agent to help break the Soviet front. It should use Tito as it tried to use Darlan, as Hitler tried to use General Vlassov, as the British tried to use Benedict Arnold.

This would in no sense mean appeasement of Tito, or acceptance of Tito's régime. When the Kaiser sent Lenin through Germany to Russia in 1917 to speed the breakup of the Tsarist empire, he was not appeasing Lenin. He knew Lenin would remain his deadly enemy. But in times of war — or cold war — dissidents and deserters can often be useful. Tito is a deserter from the Kremlin's empire and might be a very useful one. Indeed, he has already proved useful; the United States government has done well to use him, and should continue to do so.

Of course, there is a risk. The U. S. might lose in its efforts to use Tito; it must proceed carefully. It must

constantly keep in mind that it is using Tito in an act of subversion, a conspiracy, an attempt to help one bitter enemy oppose another bitter enemy.

How far should one go in such a conspiracy? Should the police who use a stool pigeon merely feed and protect him, or should they hand him a revolver, even a machine gun? Each risk must be weighed; the decision will probably be right as long as the police remember that the man is a criminal and their bitter enemy. But there would be danger if they suddenly began to think that the stool pigeon was a reform leader, an anti-vice crusader, the foe of outlaws, a national hero. The danger would be increased if noble ladies and sentimental men began to hold meetings in Sunday Schools throughout the land to extol him as a champion of the exploited and oppressed.

Unfortunately, that is what some of our writers are doing to the Kremlin deserter, Joseph Broz Tito. They are turning him into a national hero.

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